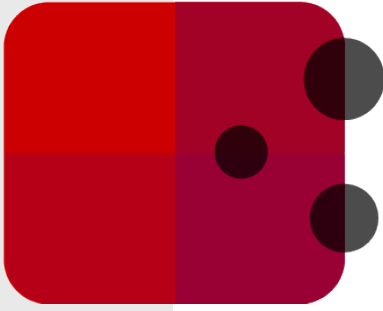


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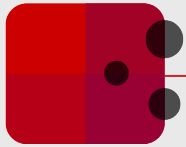


A genealogy of electronic moving  
image displays

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## Resumo

O presente artigo trata de um dos elementos do atual processo de “transição digital” em curso na cultura da imagem em movimento. Tal processo inclui a mudança para a transmissão digital terrestre, a introdução do gravador digital de vídeo e a passagem para formatos digitais na apresentação de filmes em salas de exibição. Mais especificamente, gostaria de abordar algumas das estratégias promocionais relacionadas à transição recente da tecnologia do tubo de raios catódicos para a tela plana envolvendo não só nos aparelhos de televisão domésticos, mas telas fora do ambiente da casa, assumindo escalas variáveis, desde aparelhos que cabem na palma da mão a grandes telões em locais públicos.

## Palavras-chave

Imagem em movimento, transmissão digital, estratégias promocionais, televisão.

## Abstract

This essay addresses one element of the ongoing process of moving image culture “going digital”, a process which includes the move to digital terrestrial broadcasting, the introduction of the digital video recorder, and the shift to digital formats in theatrical film exhibition. Specifically, I would like to explore some of the promotional strategies associated with the recent shift from cathode-ray tube to flat panel display technologies, not only in domestic television receivers, but also in flat panel displays outside the home ranging in scale from hand held devices to massive electronic billboards in public venues.

## Keywords

Moving image, digital broadcasting, promotional strategies, television.



This essay addresses one element of the ongoing process of moving image culture “going digital”, a process which includes the move to digital terrestrial broadcasting, the introduction of the digital video recorder, and the shift to digital formats in theatrical film exhibition. Specifically, I would like to explore some of the promotional strategies associated with the recent shift from cathode-ray tube to flat panel display technologies, not only in domestic television receivers, but also in flat panel displays outside the home ranging in scale from hand held devices to massive electronic billboards in public venues. If historical periods of traumatic technological change like our own throw into relief the competing interests and strategies of dominant market players, they also suggest the ways in which the rhetoric of technological novelty can obscure some enduring habits of thought in the manner in which media change is understood. To explore this tension between novelty and continuity, I want to examine some of the ephemeral, self-serving advertising and promotional texts created by the would-be architects of contemporary technological transformation.

One such ephemeral if suggestive text is the 2006 ad, entitled *Pull Out*, from the Korean electronics manufacturer LG made at Young & Rubicam’s New York-based agency Brandbuzz by a British creative director and an Australian director and shot in São Paulo. LG’s marketing brief was simple: despite producing more flat panel displays than any other firm, the South Korean company faced low name recognition in a market of declining opportunities for product differentiation, and the campaign thus aimed to build brand identity across its entire flat-screen business rather than promote any specific product. The result, in the form of a 30-second commercial, it evokes a seemingly infinite and sometimes vertiginous recession across eight flat screens ranging in scale from mobile phone to Jumbotron, in tracking the quotidian circular journey of its walking woman protagonist across a series of domestic and public spaces. While evoking Anne Friedberg’s 19<sup>th</sup> century urban *flâneuse* across a city-symphony day-in-the-life landscape accented by a variety of electronic screens (a sort of Vertovian *The Woman with the Cell Phone Camera*), its female protagonist nevertheless remains strikingly solitary and self-absorbed as she moves across the disparate domestic and



public spaces of daily life. Somewhat ominously, the commercial's overall effect constructs her as much an object of surveillance in a continuous mobile panopticon as an active narrative agent or even a viewing subject.

It is significant that the shift to flat panel displays has coincided with the long-running fragmentation and dispersal of the traditional television audience, causing established firms in broadcasting and advertising to zealously pursue the increasingly mobile and elusive audience beyond the home. Recent moves by broadcast networks into an astonishing range of digital out-of-home media, including “captive audience” networks aimed at viewers trapped in elevators, taxi cabs, doctors’ waiting rooms, public transportation terminals, gas pumps, and retail check out lines, have challenged television’s traditional textual forms, viewing protocols, and economic models (BODDY, 2011: 76-101). To the inevitable challenge of using existing technological platforms to promote advanced domestic display technologies – witnessed in the earlier launches of 3D TV, HDTV, and color TV – has been added the new difficulties of addressing dwindling network audiences equipped with digital video recorders, video on demand, and internet protocol TV, all serving to diminish the power of the traditional 30-second advertising spot. It’s no accident that the marketing of flat panel TV sets has been marked by the prominent use of DVR-enabled interactive features, web-based viral campaigns, social media, and elaborate digital out-of-home campaigns.

## **Selling the flat panel display**

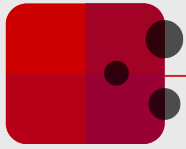
The migration of the cathode ray tube (CRT) from the oscilloscope of 1897 to World War II radar, postwar television, and computer graphic interfaces in the early 1970s (SIGGRAPH was formed in 1974) highlights a remarkably durable technological platform for the display of electronic moving images. Its current dominant replacement, the liquid crystal display (LCD), was introduced for use in electronic calculators in the 1970s and in the new product category of laptop computers in the early 1980s. LCD screen sizes, in its own version of Moore’s Law, doubled every 18 months between 2000 and 2006 while prices fell steadily.



The LCD's conquest of the TV set market after 2000 was achieved more quickly than many in the industry expected, and the last quarter of 2005 marked the first time when Japanese LCD exports topped those of CRT screens. By the end of the same year, the world's largest CRT factory, a joint venture of Philips and LG, had gone into receivership, and Sony abandoned all CRT production (MACEDONIA, 2006: 83-86).

The shift to the LCD was particularly traumatic for consumer electronics giant Sony, which was going through a painful US\$2 billion retrenchment under new CEO Howard Stringer, who eliminated 600 of the company's 3000 sprawling consumer product lines and cut 7 percent of Sony's global workforce. In 2006, operating with much lower profit margins than Apple or Samsung, Sony was losing money in its core electronics business (responsible for 70 percent of its overall revenues), and its stock was trading at less than 1/3 of its 2000 level (SIKLOS & FACKLER, 2006). By 2005 Sony had been overtaken by Sharp in the LCD market and responded in part by launching a 50/50 joint Korean LCD manufacturing venture with Samsung. For industry observers, the collaboration underscored the formidable economies of scale of fabricating large glass displays which compelled even the largest firms to share development costs (SPULBER, 2007: 54-55).

By the end of 2005 Sony announced plans to concentrate its consumer electronics efforts in the launches of the PS3 and the Blu-Ray disk player and in regaining market share in LCD displays, whose clarity, Howard Stringer told an industry group in 2006, was such that "watching grass grow is fundamentally exciting" (SIKLOS & FACKLER, 2006). Sony's transition to the LCD was especially challenging, since the company was intent on maintaining its established price premium within a flat screen sector that threatened to become a commodity market amid rapidly falling prices. As Sony's United States advertising agency explained at the time: "How do you capture the lead when you're charging a huge premium for product that you're making on the same line as your toughest competitor, all because you missed a major shift in the market?" (The world's first television for men and women. Effie awards press release). Sony's distinct Bravia TV set marketing campaigns in Europe and the United States between 2005 and



2009 suggest not only the specific contexts of an increasingly competitive flat panel manufacturing sector and a peripatetic and recalcitrant media audience, but also dramatized the enduring tropes of spectacle, technology, and gender in popular discourses around electronic media.

As elaborately laid out in its accompanying making-of web video, the production of Sony's 2005 spectacular two-and-a-half minute commercial *Balls* represented an extremely ambitious logistical challenge. The multi-day shoot by Sony's ad agency Fallon followed eight months of planning, and involved six cameras, several prop cars, seven hours of footage, and ten canons shooting 250,000 multi-color bouncy balls (the director boasted that "we went to every fun fair dealer in the country. Kids in America won't be finding bouncy balls for a while") (DIAZ, 2005). The commercial's November 2005 United Kingdom broadcast, occupying the entire two and a-half minute break before a Manchester United versus Chelsea football match on Sky Sports, was followed by 60-second TV spots and cinema advertisements for both Imax and conventional screens. The TV spots were supplemented by print press, outdoor, and in-store promotions, part of Bravia's 30 million Euro pan-European marketing campaign (the commercial also aired in Australia and New Zealand) (Thinkbox, "Sony Bravia –Balls").

One of the striking features of the Fallon's Bravia campaign was its attempt to move beyond the discrete commercial spot into an array of web-based elements, including the seeding of video materials on Flickr and YouTube, blogger submissions, agency-supplied behind-the-scenes videos, high definition images, wallpaper, and screen savers which website visitors could download and share via their PSPs and mobile phones. The United Kingdom ad trade publication *Revolution* noted that *Balls* also inspired digital out-of-home's "first creative hit" in an escalator installation in the London underground. The web response to *Balls* was robust: "17.500 sites were linked to Bravia-advert.com; more than two million people visited the site; the TV ad had 1.8 million views on the site and was downloaded 40.000 times; and there were an estimated seven million further viewings on Google Video, YouTube and other web 2.0 sites", and Jose Gonzales's *Heartbeats* soundtrack reached number three on the UK singles chart (FURNESS, 2006: 46). YouTube is still replete with commercial appropriations



and film-school parodies of *Balls* and *Paint*, and as late as 2012, the trade press still making reference *Balls's* visibility and impact. The subsequent Fallon Bravia ads followed the spectacular scale and web-intensive model of *Balls*. In the case of *Paint*, Sony further emphasized the internet components of the campaign, launching the 30-second commercial on the internet before broadcast, planning web elements early on in the production process (including providing three bloggers Sony camcorders and behind-the-scenes access), adding RSS feeds to an expanded colorlikenother.com website, and releasing a video game which won the number one slot on the United Kingdom's Channel Four's games site after its launch (FURNESS, 2006: 46). Reassuring bloggers who expressed environmental concerns over firing 70.000 liters of paint in a derelict Glasgow tower block, a Sony executive noted that "we posted information on the clean-up process and pointed out that the paint was drinkable" (FURNESS, 2006: 46).

The apotheosis of the ascendancy of the online community model over the traditional television spot was Fallon's 2008 spectacular marketing stunt for Sony's digital cameras. Rather than producing a broadcast ad, Sony's ad agency handed out cameras to 100 bloggers and invited them to record the release of 460 million liters of foam in downtown Miami. The ad industry sponsors of the 2008 Wildfire Awards praised the resulting web product, explaining, "By involving a community, Sony set out to create an experience rather than an ad. Those who participated got to feel a sense of ownership, and the brand got to linger longer than a typical 30-second commercial would" (BERNADIN & KEMP-ROBERTSON, 2008). Overall, Sony's recent consumer electronics marketing efforts reflect the shifting strategies and platforms within the advertising business in the face of a rapidly changing technological landscape.

Collectively, the European Bravia ads share a self-evident aspiration to the status of art, as Lynn Spigel notes in discussing *Paint* in the opening pages of her 2009 book *TV By Design*: "the commercial looks more like a piece of performance art than an ad for a household appliance", she remarked (SPIGEL, 2008: 1). One trade commentator at the time wrote that the earlier *Balls* advertisement "reads more like an art film rather than an advertisement", and the Bravia commercials' eschewal of conventional narration and product demonstration, along with their





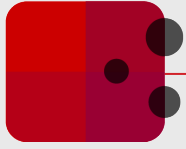
foregrounded and autonomous soundtracks, spectacular scale, highly identifiable public settings, and visual excess, bring them closer to the art-world contexts of video installations, site specific earthworks, and performance art than to the aesthetic conventions of the standard television commercial. In fact, at the time Fallon was accused of plagiarizing independent artists' work in both the Play-doh and Zoetrope ads, evoking the strong body of work by artists and filmmakers in such public large screen projections, including Robert Lepage's 2008 *The Image Mill* installation in Quebec City, Mark Simon Hewis's seven-minute film, *The Life Size Zoetrope* (2007) and the program of films and installations projected in various public spaces commissioned by the 2009 Rotterdam Film Festival, under the theme Size Matters (The YouTube dilemma, *Creative Review*, 2009: 26).

Not surprisingly, Fallon's Bravia campaign attracted a great deal of industry attention. Adweek critic Barbara Lippert wrote of *Balls*: "what really takes *cojones* is that Sony has made such an expensive bet on one elaborately produced, two-and-a-half-minute minimovie that features nothing more than 250,000 wildly colored rubber balls descending on San Francisco" (LIPPERT, 2005). One industry commentator noted *Ball's* 2006 Clio Award ceremony reception:

The ad folks, predictably, loved this spot, because its execution involved lots of expense and complication. "Can you imagine how many windows they broke?" murmured a guy in the next row at the awards ceremony. He could not conceal his envious smile. "What an outrageous shoot!" agreed the guy next to him. "They're still picking up those balls!" Ad-industry folks get bored of making conventionally effective 30-second spots and are always seeking out new, ambitious projects for themselves (Shel Silverstein, *Slate Magazine*).

A 2011 Samsung commercial set in a public square in Amsterdam, part of an 8 million Pound effort to promote its new 3D TV product line, in part reflects the move to Samsung of Fallon's Mikah Martin-Cruz (who worked on the Bravia campaign). Meanwhile, Sony has switched ad agencies twice since ending its 6 year alliance with Fallon in 2009. In 2011 the trade journal *Marketing* noted the strategic importance of the domestic television receiver market (despite its





declining profit margins) as the gateway for other consumer electronics in the home, given the product's unique potential to create an emotional bond with consumers, and argued that the logic of such marketing spectacles remained compelling. The article quoted a Grey advertising executive who worked on the Sony account: "Brands in this market need to have huge aspiration. If they don't, they risk always playing around in the periphery" (BASHFORD, 2011: 17).

In visual style, both the Bravia ads and their associated making-of videos take elaborate pains to foreground their internal audience, depicting civilian witnesses of the featured technological stunt via the highly conventionalized shot/reverse shot pattern of the Hollywood spectacle film, in a similar attempt to evoke the power of the technological sublime which eludes direct representation. At the same time, the emphasis on the reaction shot endemic to such marketing efforts also flows precisely from the implied impossibility of adequately representing the new visual and emotional experience on offer from the enhanced technological artifact.

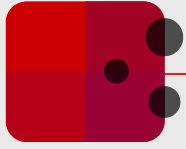
In a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*, a very different recent example of the attempt to evoke the technologically inexpressible is offered in a 2010 Sharp ad starring George Takei, part of Sharp's expensive marketing efforts to re-position the brand, expresses the conundrum in its tautological tagline, "You have to see it to see it". Advertising Age's Bob Garfield, noting the idea "that a TV commercial for a TV is a fool's errand", argued that the commercial's casting of *Star Trek*'s Mr. Sulu might have backfired: "He's just a strange guy with a deep voice, dyed hair and a vaguely creepy sense of humor". Garfield also worried that if Sharp's 33 1/3 percent improved Quattron succeeded in the marketplace, it would be quickly followed by the introduction of the Sony Quintron and the LG Octoplex. "Whoaaa! Oh, my my my my my my my my", Garfield concluded (GARFIELD, 2010: 22).

Earlier marketing efforts which accompanied the United States launch of HDTV in the 1990s also occasioned similar elaborate deferrals of the technological reveal, including a Toshiba commercial featuring a protracted unveiling of its new HDTV set before an enraptured multi-generation domestic audience depicted with an enthusiastic, if historically incoherent, nostalgia.



Of course, the oxymoronic challenge of demonstrating a visual experience unavailable on the advertisement's own technological platform was similarly evident in the marketing of color television by RCA in the United States following the Federal Communication Commission endorsement of its proprietary color TV standards in 1953. For nearly one year, unhappy NBC network head Pat Weaver was pulled away from managing the network to lead RCA/NBC's color TV set promotion efforts. The company's "Big Color" campaign featured the familiar themes of fantasy, magic, and technological spectacle, at times alternatively invoking the withheld reverse angle of Mr Sulu and the *Winky Dink and Me* interactive gesture of hardware/software integration, where viewers were asked to paste the color magazine advertisement's screen shot of actor George Grobel upon their black and white TV screens at a specified time during his inaugural color broadcast to evoke the promise of color TV. The extended series of lavish 90 minute color programs Weaver devised for the RCA's color TV campaign became known in the trade as network "spectaculars", so-named as homage to Weaver's previous career in advertising, and debates over their efficacy dominated the TV trade press in the mid-50s. For NBC's Weaver, television's so-called "humanist huckster", the television spectacular was also an attempt to elevate the medium's cultural prestige and attract the medium's "light viewers" among the educated classes, perhaps including the self-described occasional viewer depicted in this 1950s Admiral print ad depicting an unlikely urban horsewoman.

Pursuing Weaver's appropriation of the outdoor advertising's term spectacular to its pre-television roots entails at least a brief consideration of two earlier champions and popularizers of the electrical sublime, Nicoli Tesla and Douglas Leigh. Historians Wolfgang Schivelbusch and Carolyn Marvin describe the global public fascination with the electric light at the end of the nineteenth century, including New York City's 1884 Electric Girl Lighting Company, which offered to supply illuminated servants as hostesses and serving girls, and the 1,200-foot tall Tower of Light proposed for the 1889 Paris Exposition (it lost out to the Eiffel Tower) (MARVIN, 1986: 206; SCHIVELBUSCH, 1988: 3). World's fairs and international expositions became an important venue for displays of electric lighting, most spectacularly at the 1893 Columbia Exposition powered



by Nikola Tesla's new alternating current generator. That exposition employed more electric lighting instruments than found in any US city of the time (NYE, 1990: 149). The Westinghouse display at the fair featured an 18-foot darkened public chamber situated between two massive high-frequency emitting plates, where visitors were invited to handle an assortment of free-standing glowing phosphorescent tubes which spelled out the names of electrical inventors and Serbian poets, and Tesla delighted in spectacular demonstrations of high frequency electricity at scientific and public venues alike (MARTIN, 1992; NYE, 1990:382-83; MARVIN, 1998: 48).

Arising from the same context of the late-nineteenth exposition as Tesla's electrical sublime, outdoor advertising's so-called spectacular had its roots in the first 24-sheet billboards at the Paris and Chicago World Fairs'. By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century the advertising term spectacular was used to designate large scale animated incandescent and neon displays in central business districts. In the first decade of the twentieth century, when only five percent of US homes had electricity, Broadway was already known as the Great White Way (NYE, 1990: 383). The American figure most associated with the twentieth century outdoor advertising spectacular is Douglas Leigh, the so-called Boy Sign King of Broadway (in 1955 *The New Yorker* called Leigh "the ageless boy wonder of electric spectaculars"), whose massive mid-century displays in New York Times Square beginning in 1933 included a 25-foot tall steaming coffee cup, an animated detergent billboard with 3,000 blinking incandescent soap bubbles, a Camel smoker continuously exhaling perfect five-foot smoke rings for 27 years (replicated in 22 other United States cities), a 120-foot wide Pepsi waterfall which circulated 50,000 gallons of water a minute (also featuring 3,000 bulbs, 492 miles of wiring, while consuming a million watts of electricity, and burning out an average of 580 bulbs and 60 floodlights a month) (Cooling and Light, *The New Yorker*, 1955: 16). By 1937 Leigh had created 25 spectaculars between Times Square and Columbus Circle in New York City, serviced by 2 full-time crews which cruised the neighborhood's nighttime streets continuously in search of malfunctions (Spectacular Service, *The New Yorker*, 1936: 15). Leigh also designed spectaculars for the 1939 New York World's



Fair for Bromo Seltzer, claimed to have produced the first animated sound TV commercial during its semi-commercial launch in 1940, and served as one of the fifteen original directors of the 1964 World's Fair in New York City (Additional Projects by Douglas Leigh, clipping file). His many unrealized projects included painting the Rock of Gibraltar with the Prudential Insurance Company logo, erecting a crown on the top of the Empire State Building for RC Cola, and towing decommissioned floating grain elevators with illuminated advertising messages in the East River (Additional Projects by Douglas Leigh, clipping file).

In 1937 Leigh bought the rights to the EPOK display system, which projected 16mm film onto 4.104 photocells, controlling an equivalent number of made-to-order 6-watt light bulbs connected by 200.000 miles of wiring and 15.122 soldered joints in a 30 by 24-foot proto-digital display within a 43 foot by 75 foot spectacular opposite the Astor Theatre in Times Square (Leigh's Biggest, *The New Yorker*, 1937: 10). Leigh employed Felix the Cat animator Otto Messmer for 37 years to design brief animations (the longest was seven minutes), sometimes employing clips from new Hollywood releases to program the display (SELLMER, 1946: 47-51; CANEMAKER: n.p.). Tama Starr, an executive (and daughter of the firm's founder) at Artkraft Strauss, the company that fabricated many of Leigh's designs, recalled that on one occasion Leigh hired a stripper to perform in front of the photoelectric cells. Starr reports that the sight of the 20-foot tall dancer caused a rash of Times Square fender-benders (STARR & HAYMAN: np.).

Beginning in 1936 Leigh was the subject of several *New Yorker's* Talk of the Town profiles over the ensuing decades, accounts combining the enraptured tributes to the technological scale and engineering complexity of the Sony Bravia promotional "making-of" films with the condescending tone of mid-twentieth century high-culture attitudes toward television. E J Kahn's 1941 *New Yorker* profile suggested that "Leigh thinks of his creations as works of art, which is probably the way postcard men feel about postcards", reporting that

Leigh says he feels deeply moved whenever he glances at the girl's face hovering over a steaming coffee cup – one of his favorite motifs – in a spectacular he recently completed for Silex. The face has bright-red neon



lips, under which the words “Yum Yum” appear from time to time. “Look at that mouth”, Leigh says, with all the fervor of a Cezanne contemplating one of his apples (KAHN, 1941: 24-25).

Leigh’s completed postwar projects included illuminated surplus World War II airships (involving several 360-foot dirigibles, each with 14-16.000 animated lights) and elaborate lighting schemes for individual buildings (including the bicentennial designs for the Empire State Building in 1976) and lighting designs for entire city centers. In response to the threat of blackouts during World War II, Leigh also pioneered the networked or remotely controlled billboard, enabling all of his Times Square spectacles to be remotely shut down from his Rockefeller Center offices (Aglow, *The New Yorker*, 1945: 20).

A recent echo of Leigh’s architectural lighting spectacles, actual and unrealized, is found in the May 2011 celebration of Coca Cola’s 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary, which involved the illumination of the 26-story corporate headquarters by 45 projectors producing nearly a million lumens of light upon 210.000 square feet, making it the world’s largest single building illumination (Adding Multimedia, 2011, press release).

## Conclusion

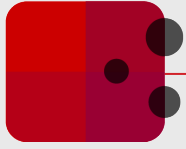
To conclude this somewhat dizzying survey of the spectacular display I’d like to return to the contemporary context of Times Square as a privileged out-of-home advertising venue. According to Advertising Age in 2005, these few blocks of midtown Manhattan drew 40 million unique annual visitors (14% of the United States’s population), who took an estimated 100 million keepsake photos. The location would rank 152<sup>nd</sup> in size in the United States if considered as a television market (The Cost of Advertising on Times Square, 2005). Many in the industry have argued that the future of digital out-of-home media, with Times Square as its most famous global showplace, lies in linking the increasingly sophisticated large scale displays to individual consumer interaction, as in Mini Cooper’s 2007 interactive billboards (where the RF-equipped key fobs of passing Mini drivers



triggered personalized messages on the giant roadside screens) and the award-winning Sony Bravia “Color Tokyo!” campaign of 2008, where users logged on to the Sony web site chose the colors projected by LED devices onto the Sony Building in Ginza in real time (TAN, 2010). As one outdoor advertising executive argued in 2010: “The future of outdoor, or any ad for that matter, is for us to start a conversation with consumers and getting them to engage with the brand” (TAN, 2010). In this regard, it has to be pointed out that Douglas Leigh’s notebooks in 1953 describe an unrealized scheme involving the creation of a specially-tailored message for Leigh’s Times Square news zipper display for every visit of his client’s distributor or large out of town customer: “Then, such out-of-town customer could be lead over to Times Square to see his name in lights ten feet tall”, Leigh wrote (Additional Projects by Douglas Leigh, clipping file).

Beyond the links of the recent Bravia and Samsung LCD commercials to contemporary art world practices, these recent efforts in large scale urban displays also borrow to varying degrees the disruptive gesture of the prank, the technologically elaborate and spectacular invasion and appropriation of iconic public spaces. One example is the fake Time Square billboard hack staged by a small ad agency on behalf of a movie studio client in early 2011. Within three days of the March 14, 2011 anonymously-posted (user name: BITcrash44) video depicting a spectacular Times Square billboard hacker takeover, the YouTube video had been watched by a million viewers and become the most popular viral video on Twitter. Many of the resulting viewer posts debating the authenticity of the stunt attempted to ascertain the precise electronic components plugged into the iPhone’s headphone jack and the mysterious device attached to the balloon. However, what was offered as an amateur video of a digital prankster was actually the work of a 2-partner marketing firm called Thinkmodo for Relativity Media, producer of the feature film *Limitless*, as part of the studio’s campaign that also employed the traditional media of subway posters, TV commercials, and digital and print ads. One of the ad agency’s partners subsequently explained that the studio had rented the screens in Times Square in a conventional manner and put up a 60-second loop of iPhone footage and merely synced up the actor’s gestures with the footage already rolling onscreen; “It was really simple,” he explained





to a website a few days after the stunt (VEGA, 2011: 17). The extraordinary attention attracted by Thinkmodo's fake hack of the Times Square's spectacular billboards suggests the power of the subversive gesture challenging the massive advertising displays which dominate our public spaces.

This fiercely ambivalent reaction to advertising's public demonstrations of technological spectacle is hardly new. Here I might offer a juxtaposition of two responses to the massive electrical signage in Broadway's Harold Square in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, including one from the poet and early film theorist Vachel Lindsay. The first is from the advertising journal *Printer's Ink* in 1908, which described the city's new vast illuminated sign: "Flowers in natural colors stand out against the night sky. Garlands and drapery are traced in many tinted fires. Delicate jewels of ruby, gold, and turquoise, wrought in tiny lamps, are suspended over dingy buildings in the sight of thousands of the hurrying ants called men" (LEARS, 1984: 393). Where this observer found tropes of delicacy and nature in the gigantic electric sign set amidst the nighttime sky, dingy buildings, and insect men of midtown Manhattan, Vachel Lindsay's 1914 poem, *A Rhyme about an Electrical Advertising Sign* denounced the display's "wicked" and "malignant" colors ("Like the beads of a young Senegambian queen") and "maggoty motions" in "sickening line" foisting advertising messages upon "shame weary girls" before offering his readers an eschatological vision of the ascension of Broadway's entire "Great White Way" into a new heavenly zodiac. For Lindsay, the new 20<sup>th</sup> century hieroglyphics of electrical advertising and the cinema were each capable of conjuring both inspiring and terrifying visions of the technological future, uncertainly linked to a disreputable past and ambivalent scientific expertise.

If one can without too much difficulty trace the antecedents of some of the technological ambitions and discursive tropes of contemporary moving image display marketing, this is not to suggest that contemporary media industries are not facing genuinely unsettled times. With the theatrical box office now representing only 20% of a Hollywood's total revenue and a first-ever decline in DVD revenues, the destabilizing prospects of IPTV on traditional models of film and television distribution are quite real. In recent years Netflix has

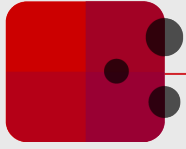




quickly moved from the number one user of the postal service to the number one user of primetime internet bandwidth, and Cisco recently estimated that 90% of web traffic by 2014 will be in the form of video. A 2009 TV industry consultant's report argued that the recent industry downturn was not merely a transitory effect of the recession, but the beginning of a decade of industry restructuring (TV Market Data, 2010). The ongoing uncertainty has fueled visions of a post-screen visual world, as Adam Woods argued in a UK advertising trade journal in 2010:

Over the past few years the viewing experience has been dominated by screens: huge ones in your living room, small ones in your pocket and medium-sized ones under your arm. But within a decade, mass uptake of lightweight video goggles and laser-powered contact lenses controlled by thought or voice will feed programmes directly into your brain, enhanced by sensations delivered via a digital patch on the skin (WOODS, 2010: 24).

Such predictions recall not only Frederik Pohl and C.S Kornbluth's *The Space Merchants*, their 1953 dystopian scifi fantasy of 21<sup>st</sup> century admen, but also Hugo Gernback's 1931 vision of television's goggle-equipped viewer, perfectly suited, as Gernback points out, for those for whom the effort of sitting up to watch television might be too strenuous.



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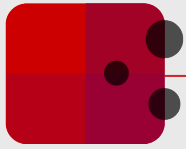
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